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U.S. and Britain Are Pressing Allies To Act Against Syria to Stop Terrorism

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The U.S. and Britain are pressing their Western allies for united action against Syria to stop international terrorism, following Britain's announcement that it has conclusive evidence linking Syria to an airport bomb plot.

Britain broke diplomatic ties with Syria on Friday after a British court convicted a 32-year-old Jordanian with close ties to Syria of trying to plant a bomb aboard a jumbo jet at London's Heathrow Airport. The U.S. quickly followed by withdrawing Ambassador William Eagleton from Syria. In diplomatic terms, that is one step short of what Britain did.

Senior administration officials said that because Washington has little economic leverage of its own, their top priority is to encourage a unified response against Syria. The issue will be taken up today at a meeting of Common Market foreign ministers in Luxembourg.

"The key is Europe," a U.S. official said. "If we don't have European cooperation, we don't have an anti-terrorism policy."

Proposed Steps by U.S.

Nevertheless, the president and his senior advisers have begun to debate proposals for increasing the economic and political pressure on Syria. The proposals were prepared during the past three weeks by the administration's Interagency Group on Terrorism, or IGT. Washington's goal, senior officials said, is a plan for escalating Western economic and political pressure on Syria if President Hafiz al-Assad continues to support international terrorism.

The IGT has proposed a number of unilateral steps that the U.S. could take, including barring U.S. citizens from traveling to Syria, asking the several hundred Americans who live there to leave, imposing additional economic sanctions on Syria and trying to persuade Saudi Arabia to reduce its economic aid to Syria.

But senior officials stressed that the U.S. isn't contemplating military action against Syria or covert efforts to destabilize the government of President Assad, both prominent features of the five-year-old U.S. campaign against Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi.

The British verdict has touched off a fierce debate about the extent of Syrian complicity in international terrorism and about how best to pressure Damascus. "There were 230 Americans on that plane," a senior U.S. official said. "We ought to send a signal to Damascus that

they cannot continue to sponsor terrorism against the West without paying a price."

Indeed, the dilemma that countries face in dealing with terrorism seems to be crystallizing in France. Against the backdrop of events in Britain have been recent reports in the French press indicating that Paris is considering a \$450 million arms sale to Syria. The sale reportedly would involve about 100 AMX-13 tanks and artillery shells. French Foreign Ministry officials yesterday denied the reports, but political analysts haven't ruled out Prime Minister Jacques Chirac's allowing the sale to go through for political reasons.

French officials believe that Syria can exercise influence both on the terrorist movements that may have been behind a recent wave of terrorist attacks in France, and on the Islamic militias that are holding seven French hostages in Lebanon.

By propping up President Assad's regime, France could enlist Syrian help in seeking the release of the hostages and obtaining restraint by terrorist movements, these analysts said. After a telephone call from President Reagan, the Syrian president helped negotiate the release of hostages seized aboard a Trans World Airlines flight in 1985. But France's position runs counter to Britain's line and could prove embarrassing to the government at a time when it is calling for greater international cooperation to fight terrorism.

Arab States' View

The Israeli government and some top U.S., British and French officials said the West should crack down on Syria because Mr. Assad's regime is vulnerable to Western pressure. Moderate Arab states such as Egypt, however, view the Western moves against Syria as a mixed blessing. Although sanctions reduce Syria's international prestige, they are likely to leave the Syrians with a "siege mentality" that will make them less willing to participate in an international peace conference that Egypt and Jordan are trying to organize.

Some U.S. and European officials agreed that there's no sure way to pressure Mr. Assad without jeopardizing Middle East peace efforts and attempts to wean Syria away from its close ties with Moscow. They also insisted that they have no smoking gun linking Syrian policy makers to terrorist acts this year in Britain, France, Spain and West Germany. Indeed, one of the biggest problems in coordinating action against terrorists has been in establishing their connection to a group or government.

In part because of this debate, senior U.S. officials said they had decided to wait for Britain to act before deciding what the U.S. should do. Following Friday's conviction of Nizar Hindawi for the April 17 attempt to plant a bomb with his unsuspecting pregnant Irish girlfriend aboard an El Al plane, British Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe told the House of Commons "there is conclusive evidence of Syrian official involvement with Hindawi."

He said Syria had been given 14 days to close its embassy in London and that Britain will close its embassy in Damascus, impose "special controls" on Syrian Arab Airlines flights and tighten visa requirements for Syrian visitors. The deadline for closing the Syrian embassy later was shortened to seven days after Syria announced it was closing the British embassy in Damascus.

U.S. officials said the El Al verdict is likely to produce some Israeli retaliation against Syria. But Israel believed that Syria was behind the operation from the start and decided to remain in the background in the hope that Britain would act instead.

Israeli officials don't want to take any action that might arouse sympathy for Syria or distract attention from the increasingly tough stance that the West is taking against Damascus.

The British government isn't asking its allies to sever diplomatic ties with Syria, although it would find such a response appropriate. It is looking instead for significant gestures of support. So far, Canada has recalled its ambassador in Damascus for consultations, and the West Germans announced that a visit to Bonn by the Syrian foreign minister would be postponed.

But British officials privately said that they weren't overwhelmed so far by the responses of Britain's friends and allies. "We will know more today, when European Community foreign ministers meet in Luxembourg," an official said.

French officials say they will examine Britain's decision at today's meeting, but it isn't likely that they will follow suit. "There has been no change in France's policy toward Syria," a government official said. Another official noted that Britain appears to be seeking more a statement of solidarity with its decision than similar moves by other countries.

Some French politicians believe that it would be counterproductive for France to break off diplomatic relations with Syria. But already strains are appearing within the conservative majority. Jacques Barrot,

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a parliamentary member of the Union pour la Democratie Francaise, said France "mustn't miss" this opportunity to display firmness against terrorism.

Syria seems certain to respond to the actions by the U.S., Britain and Canada by showing even less willingness to deal with the West, Arab diplomats said. President Assad repeatedly has denied that his country sponsors international terrorism. Syria's ambassador to Britain, Loutof Allah Haydar, Friday called Mr. Hindawi's trial a joint American-Israeli intelligence plot. Some Arab officials said the most far-reaching effect of Britain's decision to sever relations is the deeper animosity between Syria and the U.S. that is developing.

Western diplomats and intelligence officials said the U.S., Britain and other Western nations warned Mr. Assad to stop sponsoring terrorism after Mr. Hindawi began revealing his ties to Syria. Nevertheless, the officials said, the Syrians haven't stopped supporting Abu Nidal, Abu Musa and other radical Palestinian groups that regularly recruit and train terrorists in Syria or in Syrian-controlled areas of Lebanon.

"It's easier to get at states than at the shadowy groups they support," explained one administration advocate of cracking down on Syria. But other U.S. and West European intelligence and counterterrorism officials argued that even after the Hindawi trial, there isn't any hard evidence linking Mr. Assad to these or other terrorist acts. These officials said Syrian support for terrorism in Europe actually appears to have tapered off after Mr. Hindawi's arrest focused an international spotlight on Damascus.

Other officials argued that trying to pressure Syria is pointless because the U.S. has almost no economic or other leverage on Damascus. Trade between the U.S. and Syria already is sharply restricted, they note, because Damascus is on the State Department's list of nations that support terrorism.

U.S. leverage and maneuvering room also are reduced by Syria's close military and economic ties to the Soviet Union, by its pivotal role in Mideast politics and by Saudi Arabia's willingness to continue providing millions of dollars in aid to the Assad regime, these officials said.

Still other officials worry that trying to crack down on Syrian support for terrorism could endanger U.S. and French efforts to free the remaining hostages in Lebanon.

But the administration has concluded that the key to freeing the hostages in Lebanon lies in Iran, not Syria. "If Mr. Assad could have helped us, he would have done so by now," a senior official said.